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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to study the decisions which experienced teachers would make in planning a new unit of curriculum and instruction. The study focused on unit planning in the context of the total scheme of teacher planning, i.e., yearly, term or semester planning, unit planning, weekly planning, and daily lesson planning. Seventy-six experienced elementary and secondary teachers were asked to plan a unit, listing in chronological order the planning decisions made prior to the beginning of the unit, and decisions that would be made as the unit was being taught. An analysis of the results summarizes the following points: (1) the major concern in unit planning appeared to be the question of what content is to be included in a general sense, and where this fits into the district and textbook curriculum; (2) the second concern was what resources and materials would be readily handy; (3) there was indication of the need for evaluation, but in a typical test approach; and (4) there was not much evidence that great consideration would be given to student interests and motivation in planning. (JD)

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A STUDY OF TEACHERS' PLANNING

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Introduction

One of the persistent questions concerning the schooling enterprise has to do with the nature of teachers' thinking and planning. Johnston, Markle, and Boland (1985) in a discussion of the research on teacher thinking identify several subcategories of research which include teachers' planning, teachers' interactive thoughts and decisions, and teachers' implicit theories. It is interesting to contemplate how these subcategories are related in the thinking and planning of the individual teacher. Assuming that there is some interaction, the focus of this study is on teacher planning with the understanding that teachers' plans are somehow related to their "interactive thoughts and decisions and implicit theories."

Perhaps the most basic question (with tongue in cheek) concerning teacher planning is "to plan or not to plan?" However, most people tend to believe that at least some planning by the teacher is helpful--if not essential. The more specific questions seem to be:

How much planning should be done prior to instruction?

How detailed should the prior planning be and still allow for creativity and spontaneity?

Should plans be stated in terms of learner behaviors as well as teacher behaviors? (the behavioral objectives issue)

Should teacher plans be written? (some researchers on the question have coined the term "mental planning")

Probably the most famous (or infamous depending on your perspective) planning approach has been the Tyler Rationale. Ralph Tyler (1949) has proposed that curriculum and instructional planning involves four questions:

1. What educational purposes should the school seek to attain?
2. How can learning experiences be selected which are likely to be useful in attaining these objectives?

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3. How can learning experiences be organized for effective instruction?

4. How can the effectiveness of learning experiences be evaluated?

The Tyler Rationale has been used and abused by many educators. Proponents have noted that it is a logical, practical model. Critics have claimed that it is linear (an argument that Tyler disclaims), that it is industrial and technical, and that it is not the way teachers actually plan. One of the purposes of this study was to look at this question. Several researchers, including Macdonald (1965), Zahorik (1975), and more recently Doyle (1983), have suggested other approaches. Macdonald and Zahorik would have teachers focus their planning on activities. Doyle views "curriculum as a collection of academic tasks which are defined by the answers students are required to produce and the routes that can be used to obtain these answers."

Three caveats should be mentioned at this point. One has been the researcher's belief that while teachers may not consciously follow the Tyler Rationale, they do if one concedes that the purposes (to use Tyler's term) and the content tend to be "givens" in that the purposes of the school are accepted and generally understood and that a basis for selecting learning experiences is a "given" in a subject-centered and textbook oriented curriculum.

Second, the focus of this study was on unit planning. Asking for the outline for a <u>new</u> <u>unit</u> was selected as a way of asking teachers to go through a longer term planning approach as contrasted to the shorter term daily lesson plan.

A third caveat deals with making a distinction between "curricular" and "instructional" planning. It is proposed that curricular planning has to do with the selection of content and/or objectives (note that it is possible to start with either), while instructional planning would deal with organization, teaching, and evaluation strategies.

This raises the whole question of terminology and definition. For example, one might question how Macdonald's and Zahorik's emphasis on "activities" differs from Tyler's "objectives" or Doyles' "academic tasks."

Purpose

The purpose of the research reported here was to study the decisions which experienced teachers would make in planning a new unit of curriculum and instruction.

The study focused on unit planning in the context of the total scheme of teacher planning, i.e., yearly, term or semester planning, unit planning, weekly planning, and daily lesson planning.

The investigator is cognizant of the comment by Clark and Peterson (1986) that: "Continued stud, of the planning behavior of teachers might be more profitable if re,earchers shift to longitudinal designs and a cognitive-developmental framework instead of continuing to accumulate descriptions of the planning of experienced teachers." However, these authors also state that: "The task of modeling the planning process of teachers is far from complete." This investigator believes this is particularly true of the process of unit planning. In this regard, Clark and Yinger (1986) indicate that unit planning was cited most often by teachers as most important [my emphasis], followed by weekly and daily planning. On the other hand, they "conclude that substantial teacher energy is devoted to structuring, organizing for, and managing limited classroom instructional time."

Clark and Yinger (1986) have described the unit planning process as cyclical--including "preactive," "interactive," and "postactive." The study reported here is only preactive, i.e., what the teacher would consider in developing a unit plan and in anticipating the decisions they would be making as they teach the unit. (The investigator recognizes the question of "ecological validity." However, in-depth interviews and class observations were beyond the scope of the study. There were, however, extensive follow-up class discussions.)

One of the basic questions concerning unit planning is whether experienced teachers do it all. Developing a unit plan seems to be a common assignment in preservice methods classes and for student teachers, but there is the question of whether practicing experienced teachers have the inclination, the time, and the energy to do unit planning.

Methodology

In the study the investigator involved practicing and experienced teachers who were graduate students in a course on Curriculum Planning. The responses are from 76 teachers (53 female, 23 male) who are teachers in a large city school system, in suburban school systems, or in private schools. The age range is from 25 to 51. Teaching experience ranged from one year to thirty with eleven in grades K-3, fourteen in grades 4-6, eighteen in grades 7-9, twenty-three in grades 10-12, and 10 in postsecondary programs. The elementary teachers typically teach all subject areas except art, music, and physical education. The middle school/junior high school and high school teachers represent practically all of the subject areas. The post-secondary teachers represent a variety of general education and technical areas.

The participants were asked at the beginning of the course to: "Assume that you are going to teach a new unit to your class for approximately 2 to 3 weeks. Choose any topic you wish, but it should be on a topic that you have not taught before.

1. List in chronological order the planning decisions you would make prior to the beginning of the unit.
2. List the decisions you anticipate you would be making as you teach the unit.

The participants were given one week to develop the outline of a unit plan.

Analysis and Comment

It is important to note that the participants were asked to respond at the beginning of a graduate course in Curriculum Planning. Thus, they had not been "brainwashed" by the course. However, the investigator presumes that they had experienced some instruction on planning in methods courses and in student teaching experiences. Indeed, approximately two-thirds recalled having to develop a unit plan in their undergraduate program--although they also recalled their preoccupation was with daily "lesson planning."

The primary question posed by this study was whether experienced teachers engage in "unit planning." The answer to this question seems to be "no." The planning of these experienced teachers would seem to be on day-to-day lesson

plans--with longer range planning geared to the textbook (chapters or units) and much "mental planning."

The concept of "unit" raised some interesting comments and questions in the follow-up class discussions. The investigator found that he had assumed more background and understanding than was warranted. One notion that has been held for years is that chapters in textbooks tend to be treated somewhat as units. (Indeed, in the early 1950s a number of publishers changed their "chapters" to "units.") From the class discussion, planning chapter by chapter seems to be the case for most teachers.

A second major question of the study was whether teachers actually use the Tyler Rationale in their planning. The investigator has contended that they do--if one concedes that they accept without great consternation and question the "answers" to two of Tyler's questions. That is to say they agree as to the purposes the school seeks to attain and what learning experiences are selected to achieve these purposes, i.e., the curriculum. While the latter question provides some leeway in regard to learning experiences or activities, the textbooks and workbooks tend to determine the "experiences" and provide guidelines or restrictions to responses to Tyler's other two questions of "organization" and "evaluation." By the way, in follow-up discussions only 3 or 4 had any notion of the Tyler Rationale.

The written responses and subsequent class discussions tend to support the investigator's predisposition in this regard. While the respondents were asked to consider a <u>new unit</u>, the first and major concern of over 80% of the respondents was whether or how the "content" would fit with the district curriculum and the subject area they were teaching.

The responses were analyzed in regard to teaching level (K-3, 4-6, 7-9, 10-12 and postsecondary) and there were no outstanding differences. It is interesting that only two viewed this opportunity from an interdisciplinary perspective. One might expect more of this particularly from those in middle schools because of the literature regarding the characteristics of middle schools.

As indicated, the concern for "content" is <u>the</u> basic and first consideration. This included securing administrative approval if the unit topic was considered controversial or outside the district curriculum. This concern for content is even more striking and apparent if "objectives" are

stated as "to know," "to learn," "to introduce," etc. rather than more specific statements of learner behavior. This became a major point in subsequent class discussions concerning the definition of terms such as goals, purposes, experiences, activities, objectives, competencies, and outcomes.

Twenty-five of the 76 respondents made no mention of goals and/or objectives and only two used the term "behavioral objective."

Following the first concern about content was the question of availability and selection of resources and related materials. Over 75% indicate this as a major concern--many to the extent that once a very general identification of the content this became the first order of business.

The investigator was particularly interested in comparing the results of the study to that of Zahorik (1975). He asked teachers to "indicate the decisions they make as they plan to teach one or more class sessions or periods." (The investigator would describe this as "lesson planning" rather than "unit planning.") Zahorik identified eight categories in his analysis:

1. Objectives - Decisions about goals, aims, outcomes, or purposes.

2. Content - Decisions about the nature of the subject matter to be taught, such as the identification of the facts.

3. Activities - Decisions about the type of learning activity or experience to be used.

4. Materials - Decisions about resources to be used such as books, films, field trip sites, and guest speakers.

5. Diagnosis - Decisions about students' readiness for the particular lesson or session. This would include students' previous learnings as well as their ability and interests.

6. Evaluation - Decisions about how to determine the effectiveness of the lesson or session.

7. Instruction - Decisions about teacher verbal and nonverbal behaviors and teaching strategies to be used.

8. Organization - Decisions about how to arrange the teaching-learning environment such as grouping of students, use of space, and use of time.

Zahorik found determining activities was the decision which came closest to being used by all teachers (81%). He found that at least 25% considered content, objectives, materials, evaluations, and diagnosis (70% - content, 56% - objectives, 56% - materials, 35% - evaluation, and 25% - diagnosis). In his study, 51% indicated content was their first consideration.

In the study reported here, over 75% indicated content as their first concern. Zahorik indicated that 56% of his respondents listed objectives. Note that in his analysis, he defines "objectives" as "Decisions about goals, aims, outcomes or purposes." But in Part II of his study, he differentiates between "specific objectives" as "one which has a narrow focus, a behavioral form, and was accomplishable in a short time period." He defines a "general objective" as one with "a broad focus, a topical form, and could only be accomplished after a considerable period of time." This affirms a general finding of this study, i.e. there is confusion as to what terms such as purposes, goals, objectives, activities, and experiences mean in the planning of teachers.

Zahorik also reported that 56% listed materials in their decisions. This study would indicate that determination and availability is even more important in unit planning. As indicated, once the general topic (content) was determined, the question of resources became a basic concern by over 75%.

Another comparison with the Zahorik study concerns what he calls "diagnosis" which he describes as decisions about student readiness and prior learning. He indicates that 14% considered this in their planning. In this study, about 10% indicated this would be a concern in their planning. Evidently, providing for learning set and motivation is either in the realm of "mental planning" or perhaps "null planning."

In reference to Zahorik's categories of "instruction" and "organization," approximately one-third identified a concern about teaching strategies and class organization. The major concern was allocation of time which leads to daily lesson planning. For about 25% the unit plan seemed to be simply a series of daily lesson plans.

Finally, Zahorik found that 35% listed "evaluation" as a decision in their planning. In this study, over 75% indicated the need for an evaluation plan. From the class discussion this would generally take the form of a

paper/pencil test of some kind. When it was suggested in class discussions that there might be other approaches they "applauded" but seemed to believe that the "test" was what was expected of them.

In summary then:

... the major concern in unit planning would be the question of what content is to be included in a general sense and where this fits in the district and textbook curriculum

... the second concern would be what resources and materials would be "readily" available. (In the class discussions, there was little indication that much time and energy would be used to pursue resources not readily accessible, i.e., in the classroom or the school. There is almost the sense that if it isn't immediately available--forget it.)

... there was indication of the need for evaluation--but a rather typical "test" approach.

... there was not much evidence that great consideration would be given to student interests and motivation in planning.

The investigator comes away from this study still "believing" in the importance of teacher planning and believing in the efficacy of a "unit" curricular and instructional approach but with the general feeling that <u>not much unit planning and teaching</u> is going on--unless one considers "chapters" to be units and accepts the notion of teachers' "mental planning."

The investigator is still of the mind that the Tyler Rationale is being used--but with the purposes and experiences "givens."

And, finally there is a need to clarify our planning language.

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